

# How Alfie Passed the Lemon

By SEWELL FORD

Drawings by F. Vaux Wilson

AS I was sayin' to Swifty Joe, "Swifty," says I, "did it ever strike you that every garden has its lemon tree?"

"Ahr, chee!" says Swifty. "All the hand organs is playin' that tune. Ring off!"

But say, what's the use wastin' high art conversation on a cocoanut head like that? So I don't tell him what happens out to Primrose Park on a wet Sunday. You see, when I goes up on Saturday night I was lookin' for another dry sizzler; but I guess I must have read the signs wrong, for when I wakes up in the mornin' the rain is comin' down slantwise and plenty, and the lawn is lookin' as soggy as the under crust of a huckleberry pie.

It sure seems like an all day session with my heels up on the rail and nothin' doin' but read the papers and wish I was back on Broadway. One of Mrs. Whaley's Sunday breakfasts cheers me up some, and I've got myself planted in a dry corner of the side porch, prepared for the worst; when I hears somethin' out on the Post road that makes me sit up. It sounded like a solid bump, followed by breakin' glass. I squints out through the rain and sees a big black tourin' car with its nose jammed good and hard against an elm tree about three foot thick.

"Looks like a case of skiddin'," says I to myself.

That's just what has happened. There's quite some of a curve out there, and, the road bein' greasy, and maybe on account of the dew on his goggles, Mr. Shuffer has cut it too fine. Not bein' able to climb the tree or go through it, the sixty-horse power gives a hiccup or two and goes out of business.

Lucky he was runnin' inside the speed limit, or the machine would have plastered him up against that tree so tight the coroner would have had to pry him off with a putty knife. As it is, he only has his wind knocked out by the steerin' wheel, and before I can grab an umbrella and get half way out to the road he has got his breath back and has climbed out to take a view of the busted lamps and the crumpled hood.

"That's one way of stoppin' quick," says I, soothin'.

"*Sacré-à-à-à!*" says he.

"Which don't help much," says I; "but if it's any relief to your feelin's, let it come."

And he does too. I don't understand much French; but you can always tell cuss words in any language, and this gent had a fine lot on tap. He was walkin' around that busted machine and tearin' 'em off by the yard, when some one raps on the plate glass windows of the limousine and he corks up like the emergency brake had been put on.

"Gee!" says I, "I thought you was runnin' an empty. If you've got folks in there you'd better see how bad they're shook up."

With that I begins rubberin' at the black windows; but I got as much satisfaction as if I'd been peekin' down a jointed gas pipe. Every curtain was pulled down tight, except one, and that only stays up long enough for a hand to wave the shuffer to the other side of the car. He trots around lively too, and begins to explain how it happened and what the damage was.

Well, there didn't seem to be any wild call for my help, or society either; but I was gettin' curious. I wanted to know what kind of people was ridin' around in the rain that way, with the shutters all up, so I strolls across to my own side of the road and waits to see what's goin' to happen next. It didn't take long for Goggles to convince his people that the car was all to the bad. Then I sees a shade pulled back, and I has a feelin' that some one was sizin' me up close. In a minute or so the shuffer comes over and touches his cap, as polite as you please.

"Ees that the house of monsieur?" says he, pointin' to the cottage.

"That's the house of me, for a fact," says I.

"Pardong," says he; "but will monsieur have the great kindness to declare his name?"

"Why, cert., Frenchy," says I. "I am Monsoor Shorty McCabe. Here's my business card and telephone number. Sorry I ain't got my latest photograph and vaccination certificate too."

"*Merci, merci!*" says he.

"Same to you and many of 'em," says I.

It wa'n't exactly the weather I'd pick out for swappin' bows and that sort of thing; but I can be just as polite as the next one, even if I am standin' in the mud, with an umbrella leakin' down my collar.

Frenchy takes the card over to the shut up machine and pokes it through a slit in the door. Say, it was all done as mysterious as if the stage was set for some kind of a jugglin' trick. First Frenchy puts his face up close to the glass and chins a minute or so without takin' breath; then he listens to what somebody fires back, shruggin' his shoulders and shakin' his head all the time; and next he steps



They Proceeds to  
Haul Out the Party.

out into the road, lookin' up and down anxious like.

I was gettin' soaked from my knees down; but it was too excitin' a thing to leave. All of a sudden the side door is pushed open, and some one beckons me over. He was a well shaped, middlin' oldish gent, with a cropped gray mustache and a pair of close set gray eyes that I could almost feel explorin' the back of my head as he turned 'em on me. But he was real smooth spoken. He wants to know how far it is to the nearest garage, and if he could telephone, and if I minded them waitin' awhile at my place. Course, I says that in a case of this kind my ranch is wide open for as long as they likes.

"Well," says he, turnin' to the dark corner of the car, "what do you say?"

Blessed if I could see a thing inside there; but I has a lady all pictured out, even to just how high her veils come on the cushions. All the answer he gets is a sort of mumble that I couldn't make out.

"But you know it isn't safe to stay here," says he to the one in the corner.

I pricks up my ears a little at that. Maybe sittin' in a busted bubble alongside the road ain't the most joyful pastime in the world; but I couldn't figure out why it wa'n't safe. The argument seems to convince the unknown, though; for there come another mumble, and the first gent piles out. Then him and Frenchy ranges up on either side the step and proceeds to haul out careful a tall, bent shouldered party with his head all muffled up in a steamer rug that he was wearin' same's a washerwoman wears a shawl. By the gentle way they handles him I thinks first off that he's sick or somethin'; but when his feet strikes the ground he stands up without bein' propped and steps around like a well man.

Gent number one, noticin' me standin' there with my mouth open, remarks, "Perhaps you will lead the way, Mr. McCabe?"

"Sure," says I, and puts myself at the head of the procession.

It wa'n't until they'd 'phoned for a wreckin' machine and Frenchy has been sent off with his instructions, that I gets a good look at number two; for he waits until everything is settled before he begins unwindin' the head wrappin's. Then I sees I'm entertainin' a curio. Not that he was one of the toothless, snow capped kind. His hair is only nicely frosted up, and his face is as smooth as a baby's; but he has a complexion like an apple dumpling, and them eyes of his was the foxiest, shiftiest set of lamps I ever see in a man.

Course, I could account for the crop of soft, wavy hair, and the white, even teeth. They come from the store, and a better job was never turned out. But the eyes has me guessin' from the start. I'd have bet my pile there wa'n't another pair like 'em in the country, and yet they has a sort of familiar look I couldn't get away from. I was dead sure I hadn't run across the rest of this old gent; but I couldn't shake the thought that somewhere I must have seen them eyes before. Say, it was

enough to give you the creeps! So that's where I starts hintin' for particulars.

"Excuse me," says I, "but I didn't catch your names."

The two gents flashes a look back and forth, and then the one that's been doing the talkin' speaks up.

"Thayer is mine," says he, "and this is—er—Mr. Dayton."

Say, he was a smooth boy, all right. The Thayer comes out just as though he was used to sayin' it, and if it hadn't been for the diamond W on his gold watch fob I shouldn't have suspicioned it at all. There was only the least little bit of a hitch about the Dayton too; just enough to give me a quiet hunch that I was bein' treated to an incog.

"Dayton, eh?" says I. "From Ohio?"

At that they swaps another quick look, and then both turns on me. But when they sees me grinnin' they knew it was only a josh.

"Ah, Dayton, Ohio!" says Mr. Thayer. "Very good, very good!"

"That's nothin' to what I can do on a bright day," says I. "But make yourself to home, gents, while I dig up a box of smoke sticks."

When I comes back with the cigars Mr. Dayton has shed his long rain coat and is over in the corner preparin' to get down on his knees in front of a Morris chair. Thayer has just spotted

his motions, and his straight cut mouth begins to curl up at the corners.

"Oh, I say, Henry," says he, "is that—er—exactly necessary?"

"Samuel," says Mr. Dayton, speakin' kind of solemn and wavery, "we have just had a providential escape from a fatal accident. It is fitting that I should return thanks for—"

"Yes, yes," says Thayer; "but can't you hold it over until—" and here he squints at me.

"Oh, let him blaze away," says I. "I ain't one to bar prayin'. Fire ahead!"

And he does. It was as fine prayin' as I ever heard too, and before he gets through he's squared himself with everyone from here to the Pearly Gates, not forgettin' me, and the kind hearted elm tree that didn't turn out to be a ten-foot ditch. My! but he sure was a good man! Made me feel mighty low down and mean, just listenin' to him.

The effect on Mr. Thayer was different. He stands there rollin' his eyes up to the ceilin' and lookin' weary, just as if he didn't have any religion at all. He has a hard face, that man Thayer, though; one of the kind that reminds you of panics in Wall Street, and customs inspectors, and police court judges.

It was easy to see his mind didn't set easy; for after the services were through and me and Mr. Dayton was havin' a talk, the old gent as calm and satisfied as though he was at home. Mr. Thayer was pacin' up and down the room, now and then stoppin' to take a nervous squint out of the windows at the road. He couldn't have been more uneasy if he'd been tryin' to dodge a bill collector.

Mr. Dayton was as much interested in me as if I'd been his new son in law. He wants to know all about the physical culture business, and what rent I pay for the studio, and what my average income is, and how much I'm saltin' away in the bank. He seems kind of pleased to hear I don't follow the races, or monkey with the market, and he hands out a lot of good advice about investin' my surplus in first mortgage bonds and real estate. Fatherly! It was almost as good as bein' adopted by a minister.

Right in the middle of our talk Mrs. Whaley comes rushin' in from the kitchen and says as how Dennis has nabbed a suspicious actin' character that he's caught tryin' to sneak into the stable, and is towin' him our way.

"Gee!" says I, "this is my day at home for sure. Well, tell Dennis to lug him in on the carpet."

"What! In here?" says old Mr. Dayton, jumpin' up and lookin' scared. "Aren't you afraid?"

"Ah, say now, don't get uneasy," says I. "Most likely it's only some seedy hobo tryin' to get in out of the wet. Let's have a look at him."

"But, you know," says Dayton, "I had rather not—"

It was too late for him to do more than jump for a dark corner of the room, though; for in comes Dennis, holdin' the guy by the collar. One look was enough to see he wa'n't any reg'lar freight car tourist; but beyond that I couldn't place him. He's a long geared, thin shanked, sallow faced